

United States Senate

October 5, 2017

The Honorable David J. Shulkin
Secretary of Veterans Affairs
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Secretary Shulkin,

I write today concerning the Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) efforts to reduce veteran suicides. According to the VA's recent release of veteran suicide statistics for each state, Arizona had one of the highest rates of veteran suicides in 2014. Moreover, an independent report by Arizona State University shows Arizona's veteran suicide rate was nearly 400 percent higher than the VA's reported rate during the same time period.¹

Veteran suicide is not merely a VA problem – it is a community-wide problem. As you previously stated, “of the 20 suicides a day, 14 are not under VA care.” As a result, the VA lacks the fundamental ability to locate at-risk veterans and provide mental health treatment to more than 365,000 of Arizona's 522,000 veterans.

We know that combatting veteran's suicide will require much more collaboration between the VA and Arizona's communities to identify those at risk of suicide and get them the help they need. I'm proud that Arizona is leading this important effort with the “Be Connected” program, which connects Arizona's veteran community with VA hospitals in Phoenix, Tucson and Prescott to address veterans suicide. The program leverages existing resources, both in the community and at the VA, to eliminate confusing or duplicative services and increase access to VA resources. Under the program, community veteran peer supports collaborate with existing VA peer supports to identify veterans living in both urban and rural areas who have limited access to mental health resources to get them the support they need.

Important progress is being made in Arizona to combat veterans suicide through the “Be Connected” program, and I believe even more progress can be made if we replicate this program nationwide. With this in mind, please answer the following questions about how the VA is working to address this tragedy:

1. Since 70 percent of at-risk veterans who commit suicide do not seek care at a VA facility, what is the VA doing to promote collaboration across federal, state, local, private and non-profit organizations in both urban and rural populations?
 - a. What guidance have you given local VA hospitals regarding collaboration with outside entities?
2. What is the VA doing to model Arizona's “Be Connected” as a prototype for trans-organizational collaboration to address suicide?

¹ Katz, Charles M., and David E Choate. *Data-At-A-Glance, Violent Deaths Involving Veterans Victims*. Arizona Violent Death Reporting System

3. In 2014, Arizona and the western states had some of the highest veteran suicide rates in the country, which were three times higher for veterans and five times higher for younger veterans. Does the VA's data tell us why this is happening?
 - a. What does the VA do to collaborate with other federal partners like the Department of Defense and the Indian Health Services to prevent veteran suicides in the western states?

I look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "John McCain". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "John" and the last name "McCain" clearly distinguishable.

John McCain
United States Senator